FINISH

By Dr. Jimmy Horner

Most of us are very familiar with the saying, "it's not how you start but how you finish." This can indeed be an encouraging reminder when we stumble, try to pick ourselves up and attempt to muster the resolve to go on and hopefully, finish strong. We can also help our cattle to be able to finish strong once they enter the feedlot or finishing phase of the production cycle.

A frequent misperception in our industry is that if a producer's cattle don't perform or finish well at the feedlot it must be "their" fault. This can certainly be the case, but all too often the cow-calf producer may actually be the one primarily responsible for disappointing results in the finishing phase by failing to prepare their cattle properly prior to leaving the farm.

Whether a producer sends their cattle to a commercial feedlot to be finished or feeds them out on the farm, there are some basic management practices which can contribute to success during this period. Please let me first clarify that in the Wagyu industry whether producing full bloods or F1's or anything in between, I am of the belief that producers should be focused on beef quality above all else. Our firm encourages our clientele to aim for US Prime as their benchmark or base.

I'm absolutely convinced after serving this industry for over 23 years that any Wagyu is genetically capable of yielding "Prime Plus" beef and yes, I'm even referring to Wagyu crossbreds as well. The genetics in the Wagyu breed are that good, it's the management and care of these animals that has the most room for improvement.

We've learned in recent years through fetal programming research that all roads lead to the momma cow as the beginning of how much success is going to be realized 20-30 months later after her calf is harvested.

So, we'll go ahead and consider it a given that mom will be well-cared for, fed properly and in good condition prior to calving in order to best "set the table" for her calf's performance down the road. In addition to proper care and nutrition of the dam, some key management practices required for optimum success in the finishing phase at the farm level include a proper herd health and vaccination program, early and low-stress weaning, early and low-stress castration and dehorning, creep feeding, and feed bunk and trough training.

Herd Health and Vaccination Program

Past US cattle industry surveys have revealed that over a third of cow-calf operations do not vaccinate calves for respiratory disease though this is the leading cause of death in most feedlots. Obviously, vaccination schedules can differ but a customized program for the herd should be implemented after consultation with a local veterinarian. Calves should also be de-wormed and studies show that de-worming weaning age calves at least 2 weeks prior to vaccinating allows them to mount a better response to the vaccine.

Early and Low-Stress Weaning

The benefits of early weaning on eventual feedlot performance and carcass quality have been well-documented. The advantages of early weaning with calves on Wagyu cows is even more justified when considering the milk production of most Wagyu cows. Early weaning can also lead to more rapid rumen development as well as functionality if calves are fed a high-quality starter grain.

Since a large amount of stress can be associated with weaning, techniques that minimize stress during this time may benefit both calf health and performance. Additional stress results when calves are introduced to unfamiliar surroundings post-weaning. Providing calves access to the weaning area a few days beforehand can prove useful. Corrals, drylots, or "small" pastures or paddocks can serve as weaning facilities but facilities must have good fencing that will prevent nursing. Small lots haven the advantage of reducing fence walking or pacing.

Fenceline weaning, where calves remain in sight of and in close proximity to their dams, can reduce weaning stress. One technique involves initial nose-to-nose contact between cows and their calves followed by gradual increases in separation distance. Fenceline weaning also allows high-quality pastures to be used as weaning facilities instead of potentially dusty drylots.

Research has shown that fenceline contact with dams at weaning minimizes losses in weight gain in the days following separation. In addition, calves totally and abruptly separated from their dams did not compensate for losses in weight gain even after 10 weeks post-weaning compared to fenceline-weaned calves. Properly weaned calves results in better feed consumption and better weight gain

along with less stress.

Early and Low-Stress Castration and Dehorning

Castration becomes increasingly stressful as bull calves get older. Younger calves experience less bleeding, infection and weight gain depression than older ones. Younger calves also have more time to recover or rebound from the stress associated with castration. It's entirely understandable that seedstock producers may prefer to delay castration before deciding if a particular calf is a meat or breeding prospect.

But for those in the business of producing beef, castration should be performed as early in the calf's life as possible. Restraining and handling younger calves is much easier than working older, larger ones. An ideal time to castrate is during the initial 36 hours after birth and calves should be castrated no later than 3 months of age.

Though many commercial producers castrate at time of weaning, this practice is not advisable due to the amount of stress incurred. If calves are not castrated soon after birth it is best to ensure a minimum of 2-4 weeks between castration and weaning. Of the various methods available, surgical castration soon after birth works well. Though banding may seem less stressful, research does not necessarily affirm this and recent research appears to associate banding soon after birth with increased susceptibility to urinary calculi and bladder-related issues later in life.

Dehorning is pretty much a must if a producer is sending calves to a commercial feeder. Though the simplest way to produce calves without horns is through the use of a homozygous polled sire, availability of this trait in the Wagyu breed is limited currently. Dehorning method may differ by age.

Horn tissue is formed in specialized cells in a small ring surrounding the horn button. Bloodless dehorning methods attempt to destroy this ring of cells and should be performed early in life prior to significant horn growth. Mechanical dehorning can be performed at any age or size; however, stress and related complications can be lessened by dehorning at a younger age.

As with castration, it is very important to ensure that calves are properly restrained for physical dehorning. Commercial feedlots and certain preconditioning programs may require dehorning or tipping horns back to the hairline. Nevertheless, dehorned calves should be fully healed before shipment.

Creep Feeding

Creep feeding Wagyu calves is vital in most instances due to the below average milk yield of most Wagyu dams. Obviously, this practice is not as critical if calves are born to Angus mommas or other better milking breeds, but it is still recommended in any operation trying to produce high quality beef.

Ample research has demonstrated the benefits of creep feeding as long as the creep feed is high quality (high protein, high energy, low fiber) and highly palatable. Creep feeds may be pelleted or coarse textured, but finely ground feeds should be avoided due to reduced palatability and greater chances of respiratory issues associated with their use.

Many of our clients begin offering creep feed as early as 2 weeks of age to supplement momma's milk and to help initiate rumen development earlier in life. Some think creep feeding is only for calves after they're weaned and this practice is certainly better than not creep feeding at all, but calves should be offered a high-quality starter grain as soon after birth as possible not only to supplement nursing and to stimulate rumen development, but also to ensure the calf is on a high plane of nutrition when the initial marbling surge takes place around 3-4 months of age.

If the calf is not on a proper plane of nutrition and/or if they're severely stressed during this time, a producer cannot capitalize on this first significant surge in marbling which is lost forever and can even highly impact an individual's final quality grade at harvest. Recent research from university studies has implied that as much as 50% of a calf's final quality grade or marbling score at harvest is determined during a 6-month window (the last 3 months in-utero when pre-adipocytes or fat cells are being formed and the 1st 3 months after birth). So, the bottom line is, as much as half of a calf's future marbling potential is determined at the farm by the time the calf is 3 months old.

Feed Bunk and Trough Training

Calves exposed to eating from a feed bunk and drinking from a water trough prior to finishing typically go on feed faster. Feed bunks and water troughs should be highly accessible with adequate bunk space (at least 18-24 linear inches per head). Calves should have access to clean, fresh water and a high quality mineral supplement at all times prior to entering the finishing phase.

I have always maintained that if the water is not good enough for you to drink then don't expect your calves to drink it. My dad used to be adamant about bringing 1st calf heifers into the milking barn prior to calving so they would be familiar with their surroundings after calving in order to minimize stress and exposing calves to feed bunk and water troughs comparable to those used in the finishing period is no different.

Lastly, I'm often asked by clients, "what is an acceptable death loss rate or percentage for the feedlot I'm using?" In my experience, an acceptable death loss rate should be 1% or less for Wagyu cattle in commercial feedlots. The standard for the top US commercial feedlots is 1-2% with years in which 2% death loss is realized is usually related to lighter incoming cattle.

Lighter weight cattle generally experience a higher death loss than the same source of cattle at heavier arrival weights. So, the lighter a producer's cattle are upon entrance into the finishing phase, the higher the death loss at the feedlot. Also, though many feedlots are very skilled in taking light, unthrifty cattle and "straightening them out", the best feedlot manager is still in a potentially precarious position in which he or she must work with whatever is received and in whatever shape it is in at arrival.

Incoming cattle need to be healthy, eating consistently well, in good condition, and prepared or preconditioned for the finishing facility. Producers can certainly play a critical role as to whether their cattle are adequately prepared and finish strong or not. The Wagyu breed is like no other on earth and possesses all the material required for producing premium quality beef.

The bottom line is that it is entirely up to us to allow them to attain their amazing genetic potential. Better quality, properly prepared cattle entering the finishing phase equals better results both during and at the end.